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AWAY WITH WORDS

GUIDELINES AND APPROPRIATE TERMINOLOGY
FOR THE PORTRAYAL OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES



A WAY WITH WORDS

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A
WAY
WITH
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Guidelines and appropriate
terminology for the portrayal
of persons with disabilities

Produced by
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This booklet is available in alternative
formats.

Ce guide est également disponible en
français.

INTRODUCTION:

Language is a powerful and important tool in shaping ideas, perceptions, and ultimately, public attitudes.

Words are a mirror of society's attitudes and perceptions. Attitudes can be the most difficult barrier persons with disabilities must face in gaining full integration, acceptance and participation in society.

Careful presentation of information about persons with disabilities can help overcome negative attitudes and shape positive ones. The Standing Committee on the Status of Disabled Persons found in its report *No News is Bad News* that vocabulary can create perception. Demeaning, belittling or negative words are a barrier to greater understanding and can trivialize genuine support given by a community to persons with disabilities.

Language use is changing as persons with disabilities claim their individual and collective right to participate fully in society.

Dated and disparaging words are being replaced with precise, descriptive terms which have specific meanings that are not interchangeable.

Persons with disabilities are asking, just as women and minority groups are asking, that the media use respectful terms in writing about them or issues that affect their lives.

Individuals with disabilities are working to achieve equality, independence and full participation in our society. The ways in which issues are reported and the use of proper terminology can help persons with disabilities reach these goals.

PURPOSE:

This booklet suggests current and appropriate terminology to reflect the increased participation by Canadians with disabilities in our society. This booklet is intended to encourage and promote fair and accurate portrayal of persons with disabilities. It is primarily designed for print and broadcast media professionals writing and reporting about issues of concern to persons with disabilities.

CONTENT:

This booklet has two sections and a removable insert. **GENERAL GUIDELINES** has information on terminology and portrayal of persons with disabilities.

MEDIA COVERAGE OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES deals with reporting on issues of concern to persons with disabilities. The removable insert suggests appropriate terminology.

GENERAL GUIDELINES:

- 1** It is important to remember that each word in today's terminology has a precise meaning and that the words are not interchangeable.
- 2** "Disabled" and "handicapped" are not the same thing. A disability is a functional limitation or restriction of an individual's ability to perform an activity. A "handicap" is an environmental or attitudinal barrier that limits the opportunity for a person to participate fully. Negative attitudes or inaccessible entrances to buildings are examples of handicaps.
- 3** The word "disabled" is an adjective, not a noun. People are not conditions. Do not use "the disabled"; use "persons with disabilities".
- 4** Focus on the issue rather than the disability. If the disability is not relevant to the story, it is not necessary to report it.

- 5 Try to avoid categorizing persons with disabilities as either super-achievers or tragic figures. Choose words that are non-judgemental, non-emotional and are accurate descriptions. Avoid using "brave", "courageous", "inspirational" or other similar words that are routinely used to describe a person with a disability.

Remember that the majority of persons with disabilities are average and typical of the rest of the population.

Similarly, references which cause discomfort, guilt, pity or insult, should be avoided. Words like "suffers from", "stricken with", "afflicted by", "patient", "disease" or "sick" suggest constant pain and a sense of hopelessness. While this may be the case for some individuals, a disability is a condition that does not necessarily cause pain or require medical attention.

- 6 Avoid the use of words such as "burden", "incompetent", "defective", "special", etc. which suggest that persons with disabilities should be treated differently or be excluded from activities generally available in the community.

- 7** Be particularly careful with terminology used in headlines. Remember that headlines make the first impression.
- 8** Refer to technical aids in factual, non-emotional terms. Avoid prolonged focus on support equipment.
- 9** Persons with disabilities are comfortable with the terminology used to describe daily living activities. Persons who use wheelchairs go for "walks", people with visual impairments "see" what you mean, etc. A disability may just mean that some things are done in a different manner; however, that does not mean the words used to describe the activity must be different.
- 10** Remember that although some disabilities are not visible, it does not mean they are less real. Individuals with invisible disabilities such as epilepsy, haemophilia, mental health, learning, or developmental disabilities also encounter negative attitudes and barriers.

MEDIA COVERAGE OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Researching, Writing and Reporting

- 1** Too often, when a person with a disability is featured in a story that has several possible angles, the human interest story line dominates, e.g., how the individual has overcome great odds.
- 2** There are few examples of in-depth coverage of issues of particular importance to persons with disabilities (e.g., lack of physical access to facilities, employment, poverty, etc.).
- 3** Persons with disabilities are seldom asked for their views on stories dealing with transportation, the environment, child care, etc.

The media can help create and reinforce positive attitudes towards persons with disabilities. Progress has been made in recent years and media professionals are asking advice on how to report on, discuss, and write about disability.

TERMINOLOGY GUIDE

Do not use or say

Aged (The) _____

- elderly (the)

Birth defect _____

- congenital defect
- deformity

Blind (The) _____

- visually impaired (the)

Confined to a wheelchair _____

- wheelchair-bound

Cripple _____

- crippled
- lame

Deaf (The) _____

Hard of hearing (The) _____

- hearing impaired (the)

Do use or say

SENIORS

Adjectives like frail, senile or feeble suggest a negative image of seniors and should not be used.

PERSON WITH A DISABILITY SINCE BIRTH, PERSON WHO HAS A CONGENITAL DISABILITY

PERSON WHO IS BLIND, PERSON WITH A VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

PERSON WHO USES A WHEELCHAIR, WHEELCHAIR USER
For individuals with a mobility impairment, a wheelchair is a means to get around independently.

PERSON WITH A DISABILITY, PERSON WITH A MOBILITY IMPAIRMENT, PERSON WHO HAS ARTHRITIS, A SPINAL CORD INJURY, ETC.

PERSON WHO IS DEAF

When referring to the entire deaf population and their culture it is acceptable to use "the deaf".

PERSON WHO IS HARD OF HEARING

These individuals are not deaf and may compensate for a hearing loss with an amplification device or system.

Do not use or say

Epileptic (The) _____

Fit _____

- attack / spell

Handicapped (The) _____

Do use or say

PERSON WHO HAS EPILEPSY

SEIZURE

PERSON WITH A DISABILITY UNLESS REFERRING TO AN ENVIRONMENTAL OR ATTITUDINAL BARRIER

In such instances "person who is handicapped by" is appropriate.



CONCERNING PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Do not use or say

Insane

- lunatic
- maniac
- mental patient
- mentally diseased
- neurotic
- psycho
- psychotic
- schizophrenic
- unsound mind

Do use or say

PERSONS WITH A MENTAL HEALTH DISABILITY, PERSON WHO HAS SCHIZOPHRENIA, PERSON WHO HAS DEPRESSION

It is important to remember that the development of appropriate terminology is still in progress; however, the above terms are currently in use. The term "insane" (unsound mind) should only be used in strictly legal sense. Obviously, words such as "crazy", "demented", "deviant", "loony", "mad" and "nuts" should be avoided.

PERSON WITH A DISABILITY

The literal sense of the word "invalid" is "not valid".

Do not use or say

Mentally retarded

- defective
- feeble minded
- idiot
- imbecile
- moron
- retarded
- simple
- mongoloid

Normal

Patient

Physically challenged

- differently able

Spastic

Suffers from

- afflicted by
- stricken with

Victim of cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, etc.

Do use or say

PERSON WITH AN INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY, PERSON WHO IS INTELLECTUALLY IMPAIRED

One can say, a person with Down's syndrome, only if relevant to the story.

PERSON WHO IS NOT DISABLED
Normal is only acceptable in reference to statistics, e.g., "the norm".

PERSON WITH A DISABILITY
Unless the relationship being referred to is between a doctor and client.

PERSON WITH A DISABILITY

PERSON WHO HAS SPASMS
Spastic should never be used as a noun.

PERSON WITH A DISABILITY, PERSON WHO HAS CEREBRAL PALSY, ETC.
Having a disability is not synonymous with suffering.

PERSON WHO HAS CEREBRAL PALSY, MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS, ARTHRITIS, ETC., PERSON WITH A DISABILITY, PERSON WITH A MOBILITY IMPAIRMENT



Bridging the Communications Gap

Here are some suggestions to improve communications with persons with disabilities.

- 1** When talking with a person with a disability speak directly to him/her rather than through a companion who may be there.
- 2** Avoid putting persons with disabilities on a pedestal and using patronizing terms. Interview a person with a disability as you would any other person.
- 3** Do not unnecessarily emphasize differences. Having a "one of them" versus a "one of us" attitude only serves to reinforce barriers.
- 4** In visual treatments (e.g., television, photographs), do not dwell on technical aids or adaptive devices unless, of course, the purpose is to introduce or discuss a particular aid or device.

Following an interview, ask yourself:

- 1** Am I writing this piece because it involves a person with a disability or because the issue and related circumstances are relevant to the general population? If it did not involve a person with a disability, would I still want to write it?

- 2 Is a reference to a disability necessary to the story? If it is, am I using the correct terminology (e.g., "uses a wheelchair", and not "confined to a wheelchair")?
- 3 Is this piece accurate and unbiased? Have I avoided sensationalism?

CONCLUSION

Journalists can contribute to a more positive and accurate image of persons with disabilities. The information provided to the general public, and the ways in which this information is presented, often create a framework for the attitudes people have and the ways in which they interact with individuals with disabilities. If the coverage of disability-related issues is done in a non-emotional, factual and integrative manner, the public will no doubt begin to question the prejudices and stereotypes that still exist.

REFERENCES:

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P*ortraying People with Disabilities.* National Easter Seal Society (Chicago, Illinois).

"W*atch Your Language. Words Shape Attitudes".* Frances Strong (appeared in the *Rehabilitation Digest*, winter, 1989).

W*ord Choices.* A lexicon of preferred terms for disability issues. Office for Disabled Persons, Government of Ontario.

W*ords with Dignity.* Ontario March of Dimes.

W*orthless or Wonderful: The Social Stereotyping of Persons with Disabilities.* Status of Disabled Persons Secretariat, Department of the Secretary of State of Canada.

ORGANIZATIONS CONSULTED

Canadian Association for Community Living
(CACL)

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(416) 661-9611

Canadian Association of the Deaf (CAD)

2435 Holly Lane, Suite 205

Ottawa, Ontario

K1V 7P2

(613) 526-4785

Canadian Council of the Blind (CCB)

396 Cooper Street

Ottawa, Ontario

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(613) 567-0311

Canadian Hard of Hearing Association
(CHHA)

2435 Holly Lane, Suite 205

Ottawa, Ontario

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VOICE (613) 526-1584,

TDD (613) 526-2692

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)
2160 Yonge Street
Toronto, Ontario
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(416) 484-7750

Canadian National Institute for the Blind
(CNIB)
1931 Bayview Avenue
Toronto, Ontario
M4G 4C8
(416) 486-2500

Canadian Paraplegic Association (CPA)
520 Sutherland Drive
Toronto, Ontario
M4G 3V9
(416) 391-0203

Coalition of Provincial Organizations
of the Handicapped (COPOH)
624-294 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3C 0B9
(204) 947-0303

Learning Disabilities Association
of Canada (LDAC)
323 Chapel Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1N 7Z2
(613) 238-5721

National People First
4700 Keele Street, Kinsmen Building
Toronto, Ontario
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(416) 661-9611

Canadian Deaf and Hard of
Hearing Forum (CDHFF)
2435 Holly Lane, Suite 205
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National Educational Association
of Disabled Students (NEADS)
4th Level Unicentre
Carleton University
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K1S 5B6
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One Voice Seniors Network
350 Sparks Street, Suite 901
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The Society for Depression and Manic-
Depression of Manitoba
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Canadian Friends of Schizophrenics
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